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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000425

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NAIROBI FOR ESTES, NDIRANGO, PUTNAM
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [PREL](#) [US](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: POOR MAIZE HARVEST EXPECTED IN ZIMBABWE

REFS: (A) HARARE 01636; (B) HARARE 00162; (C) SECSTATE
46766

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

THIS IS AN ACTION REQUEST. SEE PARAS 3 AND 16

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Zimbabwe's maize (corn) harvest this year will likely be less than last year's due to late planting, limited access to fertilizer and other inputs, and poor rainfall in many areas. Although official information on cereal planting, production and stocks is closely guarded by the GOZ, recent articles in the state-run press, field visits from USAID staff, FEWSNET reports, and other sources, point to the likelihood of an abysmal 2005 cereal harvest.

2. (SBU) Last year, the GOZ publicly announced that no food aid was needed because of a "supposed" bumper harvest of 2.4 million metric tons (MTs), despite most independent observers believing the harvest to have been no more than 1.0 million MTs, against a national need of about 1.8 million MTs. (Note: This is far below pre-land reform harvest levels which often exceeded 2.0 million MTs. End Note.) It remains to be seen whether the GOZ, following the March 31 parliamentary elections, will be more forthcoming with realistic estimates of area planted, production and food aid needs.

3. (U) In addition to the bad harvest, the ability of most poor households to access food through markets is expected to worsen due to continuing restrictions on trade, forex constraints, and progressively eroding household purchasing power. The result will be continuing widespread food insecurity. Mission therefore urges USAID Food for Peace to plan for a substantial food assistance program in Zimbabwe for the coming year. It is hoped that details on the levels of this need will become more apparent following the Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC) assessment expected to be carried out in April/May. End Summary.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

4. (U) This year the GOZ launched a campaign to raise maize production to 4 million MTs. If achieved, this would have been almost 50% above the highest production ever recorded in Zimbabwe (2.8 million MTs in 1981). To achieve this objective, the GOZ projected a need to plant 4 million hectares in maize, which would have required about 100,000 MTs of maize seed. Reports from seed companies indicate that the GOZ was not able to access this much seed, but probably bought more than 60,000 MTs, nearly double the quantity usually planted (see ref A). In-country experts estimate that up to 67,000 MT of maize seed was available for planting from all sources: the GOZ, farmers' retained seeds, and NGOs. If correct, this would have been enough to plant 2.7 million hectares, almost 70% above the largest area ever planted to maize in Zimbabwe (1.6 million hectares in 1996/97). But it is clear that these expectations have not been realized.

HARSH REALITY

15. (U) These great expectations have now given way to a harsh reality. Poor rainfall and inadequate access to inputs have led to reduced planting and poor expected yields in the majority of the country. Hardest-hit by failed rains have been the southernmost provinces of Masvingo and Matabeleland South where the rainy season, normally starting by early November, started more than 40 days late in most areas, with some areas still having no rain by the end of January. Thus, most maize planted in these provinces was planted very late, and some farmers did not plant at all. In addition, dry spells have continued to plague these areas into February and March. A long-term observer commented that the rains in the south have been nearly as poor as he remembers from the 1991-92 drought period, perhaps Zimbabwe's worst drought.

16. (U) The rainy season started out better in the central, northern and eastern parts of the country, and total rainfall in these areas has been generally between 80-100% of normal. But temporal distribution of the rain has been poor, as early heavy rains gave way to prolonged dry spells in January and February in many areas. These dry spells adversely affected much of the maize crop at the critical tasseling and grain-filling stages. Worst-affected have been crops planted relatively later in the season (December and January) which account for most of the planted area, in large part because bureaucratic delays meant maize seed was not distributed until after the rainy season had already begun.

17. (SBU) While the GOZ has not released official data on this year's planting and harvest prospects, unofficial estimates have been provided by staff within the GOZ's Agriculture Research and Extension Service (AREX). According to these estimates, less than 1.0 million hectares of crops had been plowed as of December 23, of which only about 33% had actually been planted to maize. An AREX source also reported that by January 21, the area planted to all cereals (maize, sorghum and millet) was 86% of the area planted to these crops last agricultural season. (Note: Mission is not sure of the credibility of these numbers. End Note.) In addition, several sources have indicated that only a small percentage of the area on resettled former commercial farms was planted with maize.

18. (U) This late and relatively low level of maize planting was primarily due to the lack of animals and tractors for plowing, the high costs of fuel and machine tilling equipment, the late availability of maize seed, and of course, the late rains.

19. (U) Even in good rainfall years, late planting of the maize crop has an adverse effect on yields. The optimum planting date for maize in Zimbabwe, given adequate moisture, is up to November 15 at the latest. The rainy season usually ends in March, which means that maize planted in January and beyond may not have sufficient moisture to mature. Last year, however, some of the maize planted in January did well because the rains continued into April. But even if this year's rains do continue that long, the day length and average temperatures will drop significantly in March and April, thus reducing yield potential.

110. (U) Yield potential has also been adversely affected by fertilizer shortages. Only about 80,000 MTs of compound fertilizer and 20,000 MTs of ammonium nitrate were sold this year, compared with an annual fertilizer requirement of 500,000 MTs. A local chemical company that produces the majority of the country's ammonium nitrate shut down for three months because it was not economical for it to operate given pricing and foreign exchange constraints. The plant opened again in October, but this was too late to have ammonium nitrate available on time. The fertilizer shortage led to parallel market selling by those who had access to the limited stocks at the GOZ's controlled price. 50-Kg bags of ammonium nitrate that were supposed to cost ZW\$60,000 (about US\$10 at the official auction rate) were being sold in a high-density market of Harare for as much as ZW\$250,000 (about US\$40).

TO APPEAL OR NOT TO APPEAL

111. (U) What remains unanswered is what the GOZ response will be to this harsh reality. It is unclear if or when the GOZ will be more forthcoming about the true state of agricultural production. It is also unclear how much food the GOZ itself may be willing or able to import over the coming year or whether it might allow private sector imports. There is speculation that the GOZ may feel secure enough after the March 31 parliamentary elections to launch an appeal for emergency food assistance. There is also speculation that the GOZ may be more inclined to

adopt market-friendly economic policies after the elections that could begin to reverse the decline in agricultural productivity.

12. (SBU) In any event, we need to be prepared to assist regardless of what the GOZ does or does not do. Given the growing food insecurity and the impending poor harvest, Post urges the USAID Office of Food for Peace to plan for another substantial food assistance program in Zimbabwe for the coming year.

SCHULTZ